

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

O/NE INTERNAL ONLY

22 November 1960

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: The Consequences of the Attempted Coup in South Vietnam

1. The immediate effect of the abortive coup of 11-12 November will probably be to harden Diem's outlook on the social and political problems facing his government and to increase his reliance on authoritarian measures. As a consequence, Diem will probably be less responsive than ever to US efforts to make him realize South Vietnam's urgent need for greater liberalization and partnership with its people. The US may be forced to operate in less than congenial circumstances, at least for the time being, and it is possible that Diem may come to believe that the US was to a certain degree responsible for the abortive coup against him.

NOTE: This memorandum has been discussed with representatives of DD/P.

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2. Diem's position of predominance in South Vietnam has been forcefully reestablished. However, over the longer term, the coup attempt may prove to have been a serious blow indeed to Diem. For if Diem does react by turning to increased authoritarianism, he will only diminish the chances of lessening the political-military pressures which have been undermining his government's authority. The stage will thus be set for an eventual demise of that government -- at the hands of either a Communist or non-Communist revolution -- and for a major blow to US prestige for having supported this autocrat so fully and for so long.

3. President Diem. Diem has clearly emerged as the chief beneficiary thus far of the coup attempt. Diem probably considers that he retained his position through his own cunning and the personal loyalties of his troops and followers, and his belief in his own invincibility has almost certainly been greatly reinforced. If reform is to come in Diem's government, it will have to begin at the top with Diem himself. The coup attempt and its aftermath would appear to have weighted the odds against any such progress in the immediate future.

4. Brother Nhu, a major target of the coup group, and the regime's Can Lao party will probably move quickly to exploit the

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new opportunities to weaken their political opponents. The leaders of the Can Lao, particularly those from Central Vietnam representing Brother Can, will argue strongly that now is the time to crush not only known oppositionists but all suspected political opposition as well. Several well-known oppositionists, including some who were probably not involved in the coup, have already been reported under arrest. Diem himself is probably not so intent as his brother upon using the coup attempt as justification for reprisals, and may be amenable to US representations for moderation. However, it is almost certain that many persons of non-Communist but anti-Diem persuasion will be subject to arrest and, in many cases, imprisonment. Those most active in the coup probably face execution.

5. The Army. Although the Army redeemed itself by its loyal support against the rebelling paratroop battalions, the fact remains that the attempt to overthrow Diem drew its strength from hitherto trusted Army units. Diem will probably undertake a considerable reorganization of the military scene, including a reshuffling of jobs at the top to counteract any coup sentiment that may remain. At the same time, the Can Lao's program to penetrate and control the Army will probably be stepped up with increasing effect. In general, government efforts to insure the loyalty of the army to

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Diem will probably be redoubled, even at the expense of temporarily lowering the Army's effectiveness against the Communist Viet Cong guerrillas. In this regard, several senior military figures whose conduct during the coup attempt was equivocal or at best lukewarm will probably get the sack. Moreover, the number of troops in the immediate Saigon area and quickly available to the government may be increased despite the cost to anti-Communist field operations.

6. The Communists. None of the persons active in planning and carrying out the coup are known to be Communists. In addition, the apparent lack of simultaneous Viet Cong activity that might have capitalized on the turbulence of events in Saigon during November 11 and 12 may be evidence of the absence of Communist complicity in the coup. However, the Communists stand to benefit from the coup attempt. Hanoi and Moscow have been quick to exploit the attempt for its propaganda value, calling it "another blow to US prestige" and "fresh evidence of the bankruptcy of the US policy based on supporting fascist regimes propped up by US bayonets." (They have chosen not to remark on the announced anti-Communist aims of the coup group.) They will continue to push this line, adding to it the theme that a popular uprising was crushed, at US insistence, by the weight of US arms in the hands of the puppet Diem's troops.



7. As for the Viet Cong guerrillas operating in South Vietnam, they will probably be emboldened by the coup forces' success, however fleeting, to take more vigorous action, particularly in the Saigon area. The Viet Cong probably have taken note of the government's achievement in rapidly moving loyal units into Saigon to put down the coup forces and probably intend to avoid causing any large-scale concentration of Diem's military strength against them. Rather, we would expect them to increase the tempo and extend the range of their activities in Cochinchina to effect maximum benefit from the redeployment and disruptions of Vietnamese Army operations caused by the coup attempt.

8. The US Position. The US had been attempting to move Diem in the direction of greater response to public dissatisfaction with his policies for some time prior to the coup. Operating under instructions, Ambassador Durbrow had talked with the President, urging him to take steps to remove corruption and mismanagement, reduce press controls, give greater attention to peasant needs, and modify the more onerous aspects of the agrovillage (collective village) program. In addition, the Ambassador asked Diem, with some trepidation, to remove Brother Nhu and his wife from the South Vietnamese scene. By early November, the Embassy felt it could report some evidence of affirmative response by Diem to these representations.

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9. We believe that the coup attempt and Diem's reaction to it will seriously set back, if not virtually nullify, these US objectives. Diem is almost certain to be struck by the similarity between the actions called for by the US and the program announced by the coup group,* and may well conclude that the ultimate US objective is identical, that is, his elimination from the government. Diem's suspicions on this score would be reinforced if he were to come to believe that the US had had some hand in the coup, or at least had had foreknowledge of it. The latter is a possibility that cannot be discounted, for the US had indeed been alerted on 8 November to the coup plans of some airborne battalion commanders by a civilian leader of the coup.

10. Diem is too dependent upon US economic and military aid to allow any rupture in relations with the US. Furthermore, he is well aware of his own importance and that of a western-oriented South Vietnam to the accomplishment of overall US objectives in Southeast Asia. We believe, however, that the prospect for the

* The announced aims of the coup group were to take more vigorous action against the Communist guerrillas by effectively mobilizing the people on the side of the government. This was to be done by liberalizing civil rights, ending economic corruption, restoring freedom of the press, and holding free elections.

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immediate future is one of a decline in US-GVN relations. Diem will be suspicious, obdurate, and even more difficult than before to deal with, and his attitude will be reflected down the line in the Vietnamese government. While this may pass in time, it would appear that the US is in for a tedious and trying period.